

## [Review] Rod Ellis (2015) Understanding second language acquisition

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## Book review

Rod Ellis, *Understanding second language acquisition*, 2nd edition, 2015, Oxford University Press; Oxford, x + 365 pp.

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*Understanding Second Language Acquisition* has remained a staple of university courses in Applied Linguistics and second language acquisition since its first appearance thirty years ago. It has been on the reading lists for my department's undergraduate elective, 'Theories of language learning', and our MA ELT module, 'Second language acquisition and research', since they began. In view of ongoing developments in the discipline, this second edition, which represents a thorough revision of the first rather than the 'entirely new book' claimed by Ellis (p. 1), is particularly welcome. Unsurprisingly, in view of his target audience of students and teachers, Ellis devotes most space to second language linguistic development, social and cognitive theories of language learning, and types of instruction; and there is little discussion of universal grammar or the expanding field of neurolinguistics. The main difference is the loss of separate Chapters on linguistic universals and learning strategies, representing two ontological extremes, from the highly abstract to the highly particular, and the expansion of one on formal instruction into two separate Chapters. Like much in linguistics, the new edition is based on a structuralist paradigm. A series of binary opposites, such as declarative and procedural knowledge, are intermittently explored, and it is their competing claims as explanatory approaches that provide some direction to the book. The distinctions reflect the scientific essentialism that characterises much of the research agenda in psycholinguistic and bilingualism research.

Ellis adopts the abbreviation 'SLA' throughout to refer to the research discipline and 'L2 acquisition' to refer to the process of learning a second or subsequent language. In the historical overview, 1973-2011, of the first chapter, he states that SLA, 'has, from the start, been concerned with how it can contribute to effective language pedagogy' (pp. 23-24), signalling a social purpose to understanding acquisition. In the second Chapter, on age and SLA, Ellis begins to explore the distinction between implicit and explicit notions of language learning. The former is possibly more suited to the learning style of younger learners, and the latter to that of older learners with their greater cognitive maturity. When the contrast of binary concepts is not shaping the text, Ellis exploits other categorical notions. For example, in Chapter 3, on psycholinguistic factors in SLA, Ellis defines and comments on three well-known psychological dimensions, viz. cognitive, conative and affective. Representative factors of these dimensions, specifically language aptitude, motivation and language anxiety, are considered more fully in the rest of the Chapter. Finally, Ellis notes that 'there is no clear distinction' between cognition, affect and learner behaviour at a neurophysiological level and suggests the importance of studying the whole learner in preference to specific factors. In doing so, he acknowledges the tension between the atomistic approach of cognitive SLA research with its careful control of variables and the more holistic approach taken by sociopragmatic SLA research. In this chapter, he makes frequent reference to Dornyei, who espouses mixed-methods designs that span the quantitative-qualitative divide.

The following two Chapters, on the development of a second language and variability in learner language, are expansions of similar ones in the first edition. Ellis concludes in Chapter 4 that, despite variations associated with learners' first languages, regularities remain observable in the developmental trajectory of the L2: universal tendencies in second language acquisition appear to co-exist with individual learner variation. Those aspects explicable by society and language are examined in Chapter 5, where Ellis reveals his own theoretical sympathies to be cognitive and universalist, tempered by an acknowledgement of individual differences in the sequences of acquisition influenced by the first language, as noted above. In Chapter 6, the role of the first language, Ellis introduces a range of possible factors - linguistic, psycholinguistic, contextual developmental and individual. All are predominantly studied in the literature as the influence of the first on the second language. In principle, the effects are bi-directional, as Ellis recognises, but the influence of the second language on the first, a growing area of interest within cross-linguistic SLA research, is not pursued here. Cognitive aspects of SLA are discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. Ellis notes that input and interaction, the eponymous title of Chapter 7, are recognised as being involved in the acquisition of a first language and have traditionally been of interest to SLA researchers. Input and interaction also contribute in one way or another to the two binary concepts previously introduced: procedural-declarative and implicit-explicit knowledge. The nature of their contribution to SLA and their ascription as cause or effect represents the relation of human behaviour to types of knowledge at the heart of the book. That is why the form of that putative relationship, as expressed in interface theory, becomes a crucial theme.

Further on cognitive aspects, in Chapter 8, Ellis reports evidence supporting the notion of separate explicit/declarative and implicit/procedural linguistic systems. Differences in understanding the nature of implicit/procedural linguistic systems are characterised by reference to Universal Grammar vs Connectionist theories. Ellis points out that to learn explicitly is to be aware of that learning, but notes that the first language can block the development of a second language - the first language acts like a saboteur, perhaps similar to the body's immune system defending against invasive forms. Interface theory, which potentially

offers a resolution of the implicit-explicit distinction, is outlined more fully. In particular, the non-interface position and the strong-interface position are analysed in the form of skill-learning theory. In the non-interface position, exemplified by Krashen (1981), the two forms of knowledge are entirely separate and their related teaching approaches result in the development of separate systems. Readers must go to Chapter 10 to discover more about the strong interface position, which assumes that explicit knowledge of linguistic forms can be proceduralised via practice, and the weak interface position, which suggests that explicit knowledge may facilitate the development of a learner's implicit knowledge, thus aiding the process of automatisisation. The various social theories, such as conversation analytic and social identity, are rehearsed in Chapter 9, the longest Chapter.

Explicit and implicit instruction are returned to in Chapters 10 and 11 respectively. The form of instruction is illustrated by various teaching methods: for explicit instruction - pedagogic grammar and production practice (eg PPP), integrated explicit instruction, concept-based instruction, comprehension-based instruction (eg Total Physical Response), pattern practice (eg Audiolingual Method), and consciousness-raising tasks; and for implicit instruction - extensive reading, the Natural Approach, and task-based language teaching. Ellis himself supports the notion that explicit instruction influences internal knowledge via implicit in-take for comprehension. Both explicit and implicit instruction are found to be effective in different ways: explicit instruction has long-lasting effects for certain linguistic features, although it has no effect on the route, ie the transitional stages of SLA; and it is more likely to benefit high-aptitude learners. Implicit instruction develops linguistic and discourse competencies.

Within the scope of just over 300 pages, Ellis introduces 218 key terms and concepts, 15 theories plus models, systems and hypotheses, and associated empirical studies. In this regard, the book is the most comprehensive and detailed of the SLA textbooks available, whilst at the same time remaining accessible. Like a Mantel novel, the complexities of the relationships create and populate an alternative world, for which Ellis provides explanatory keys. The selection of examples, regular signalling of Chapter content, and the emboldened terminology linked to entries in a 15-page glossary, all serve to orient the reader. There are occasional summaries of meta-analyses indicating the direction of theoretical advances, and the limitations of each theory are meticulously explained. Each Chapter ends with a summary. Linked online resources include the glossary, and weblinks to SLA journals, specialist research centres, key SLA researchers, suggested further reading, discussion sections for each Chapter, and a disarming letter from the author outlining how he first became interested in SLA.

For teachers, the book offers an explanation of the theory underlying a number of well-known teaching methods, and the book is most readable when exploring these connections, and at its most opaque when providing too little context, eg in the extended list of post-modern accounts of social identity, in which the implications for SLA of each example are not explicitly stated (pp. 229-230). In view of SLA's ascribed mission to facilitate language pedagogy, practitioners would surely welcome a more extended contextualisation of theory and practice, at least in the expansion of Table 10.2 (p. 244) to contain more teaching methods. Equally distracting is Ellis's adoption of the parenthetical explanation set off by dashes rather than placed in brackets, an idiosyncrasy that makes the content more difficult to process. And subsequent print impressions will want to correct the minor but increasingly persistent typos, the most visible in Table 10.3 (pp. 246-7). As Ellis warns early on, there is no single theory that neatly explains SLA, and readers hoping to find an outright endorsement of one will be disappointed. However, Ellis's account and evaluation of competing SLA theories, study and practice provides a map for students and teachers wishing to locate their practice and perhaps begin to question it. For them, this new edition of *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* will form both a compendium and a guide. Simply as a general SLA reference book, it continues to be indispensable for novice applied linguists and indeed for anyone wishing to gain a general overview of the SLA project in the new millennium. I will certainly be encouraging students to refer to it on our courses.

## Reference

Krashen S. (1981). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon., Second language acquisition and second language learning, 1981, Pergamon; Oxford.

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**Query:** Please confirm that given names and surnames have been identified correctly and are presented in the desired order and please carefully verify the spelling of all authors' names.

**Answer:** Yes